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WHAT LEVEL OF BILINGUALISM IS ADEQUATE FOR BIBLE USE

Opinion Paper

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What criteria are there for surveyors to use in determining a need for Bible translation when people are bilingual? There is debate within SIL as to whether a person needs to be at FSI level 3 or level 4.

Here is a short summary of some things I consider to be pertinent differences between levels 3 and 4 using excerpts and quotations taken from the definitions and training material for how to administer proficiency tests. If a person is only at level 3 in the language that has the Bible, but level 4 or 5 in his own Bibleless language, he will struggle more to fully understand a passage, although he will be able to do it. He will be able to express and support opinions on both concrete and abstract subjects fluently without groping for words. He will not be misunderstood though vocabulary may not be as precise or idiomatic as desired. His speech will sometimes not be completely appropriate to the social setting. After study and familiarity with spiritual topics, these areas become a field of special competence, and he will be able to discuss these spiritual matters with confidence and ease with broad, accurate vocabulary. He will not be as able to counsel or persuade others in the language having the Bible. This means he may revert to his own language which then necessitates either off-the-cuff or else less than the best Bible translation since none exists in his own language. He is usually not able to interpret well between the two languages.

So what is the threshold level in our decisions on whether to translate or not?

People at level 2 and below need their own translation, at level 4 and above they don't. But it seems to me that a decision for level 3 people could go either way and should depend on other factors. Specifically, would a translation be put to use? A group of people who are at level 3 in a language which already has a Bible, live in an advanced multilingual society. There is a much greater chance that the new MT translation would not be used by a group such as this than for a society that is more nearly monolingual. For example, the following topics might each constitute a factor in predicting whether the people will want to read a vernacular translation:

1) Is the Bible language entrenched in the church? Have pastors gone through seminary in the second language? Do they use it extensively in church? Are congregations often mixed with native speakers of other than the first language? Do church people want the new translation?

2) Would people want to learn to read their own language enough to make MT literacy practical? If primers are produced will the government policy support reading in the vernacular? After learning to read the 2nd language and spending many years in school reading it, will their usage of the Bible in the 2nd language actually be easier than in their own language for which their reading ability is much less practiced, much less developed.

3) In what domains will the vernacular literature likely be used? If we anticipate it being used in the spiritual, will this be enough to sustain usage? In what domains are younger people currently using the vernacular? i.e. is the situation diglossic such that long term the vernacular will be continued in the home and church even though the second language will dominate in, say, higher education, the better paying jobs, or other areas?

4) At level 3, comprehension may be adequate, but that language may not speak to the heart, may not be as persuasive, may seem foreign, may not gain the same entrée as a tool for witness and evangelization. This factor could well override all the others.

It may be that the best decision will be to translate only portions of the Scripture for use in initially establishing a church in a pagan community, or for use by those few members of the society who are not at level 3 or who

would prefer their own language. This may be done even knowing that as the church matures and time goes by, most people will probably prefer to use their second language even for Bible reading, prayer, and songs.

Now comes the next question: do we translate when most of the people in a society don't need a translation but a significant number do? Perhaps the thing to do is to concentrate on the people who are less bilingual. Can they be identified as a group separate from the more proficient group? That is, are they all rural? old? women? or perhaps of a certain religion? If so, could that group be expected to want the Scriptures even though the more proficient (who are likely to be the community leaders) would be using Scriptures in the 2nd language? It seems to me that if a separate group can be identified, and if it has or potentially has a structure and leadership then the changes of a vernacular Bible being used after translation is much greater than if the level 2 speakers are scattered and part of no group other than that in which the more proficient bilinguals dominate. Another way to put it is to ask whether it is desirable and might happen that a church will develop entirely in the vernacular. If the church already exists with only Bible reading in the 2nd language, then I think the question is answered affirmatively; need for translation exists. On the other hand, 3 scattered vernacular congregations out of 25 congregations using a 2nd language is probably not sufficient, though everything discussed previously would be mitigating considerations.

I do not believe that the decision criteria regarding societal bilingualism can be reduced to a nice succinct formula, unfortunately. This means that each decision will require the judgement of the surveyors and administration involved. Nonetheless, the bases for such judgements can be stated clearly along with any assumptions. And in some cases either repeat surveys after a period of time has passed may be recommended, or else trial allocations for a year or two duration. But I hope that others can sharpen the above considerations so that repeats or trials would not be necessary. Feed-back is requested.